

***Mine restoration will help protect clean water, Willamette River health*** □

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EUGENE—Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski, U.S. Representative Peter DeFazio, and the Environmental Protection Agency today announced the beginning of clean up of the Black Butte Mine, formerly one of the largest mercury mines in Oregon and a major source of mercury contamination of the Willamette River.

“This is a great day for every Oregonian who cares about clean water and a healthy Willamette,” Governor Kulongoski said. “This cleanup will help heal the damage caused by the toxic runoff present since the late 19th century. I congratulate the Environmental Protection Agency for answering my call for improved river health—and for federal help in cleaning this orphan site.”

Representative DeFazio said the cleanup will reduce threats to public health from mercury contamination in the Cottage Grove area, where the mine is located. “I feel a special concern for the Cottage Grove Reservoir and the upper Willamette,” DeFazio said. “I appreciate all the partners taking action not just to clean up this mine, but to improve the overall environmental health of our community. It’s good news for our river, and good news for wildlife.”

In 1999, after the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found unsafe levels of arsenic and mercury in the tailings, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) assigned a high priority to investigating high concentrations of metals in the soil around the site, the Governor said. The DEQ designated the Black Butte Mine an “orphan site” in 2002—meaning that those responsible for the problems are unknown, unable to pay, or unwilling to cleanup the site. The DEQ then recommended using funds from Oregon’s “Orphan Site Account” to speed the investigation and cleanup of the mine site.

The Governor visited the mine site in 2004 with Oregon Senator Ron Wyden. “Senator Wyden and I had a long talk about what should be done to clean up the Willamette River,” the Governor said, “and we agreed that the Black Butte Mine was at the top of the list. That’s why I made it a high priority under my Willamette River Legacy Program.”

At that time, the Governor also pledged to obtain federal help to address elevated concentration of metals in the soil around it.

Since then, DEQ has worked with EPA to complete a Removal Assessment Report for the site, which stressed the need to remove hot spots of contaminated soil and stabilize the slope of the hillside to prevent mercury from reaching the Cottage Grove Reservoir and the Willamette River. Contamination from the site has caused unsafe levels of mercury in fish in the reservoir—a clear threat to public health, the Governor said. In June of this year, the Governor and EPA Oregon Operations Director Socorro Rodriguez opened the second leg of the Willamette River Water Trail, and Rodriguez announced that EPA Region 10 would fund initial cleanup activities at the Black Butte Mine site, at a cost of about one million dollars—in direct response to the State’s request for help. The cleanup is expected to be completed in the spring of 2007.